

Office of Water News Clips – January 30, 2014

Alcosan expects approval of sewer plan

Outlet: Pittsburgh Post-Gazette - Online

This week or next, the Allegheny County Sanitary Authority expects federal approval of its \$2 billion plan to significantly control, but not eliminate, wet weather sewage overflows into the region's rivers.

However, unless city and county officials convince the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to make a last-minute change, the OK won't give Alcosan the additional months it requested to study and add "green" infrastructure components such as rain gardens, trees, planted roof tops, permeable pavement and rain barrels to the plan.

"EPA has let us know in meetings we've had that they don't want us to delay," said Nancy Barylak, a spokeswoman for the joint city-county authority. "The agency has told us that green infrastructure will not be allowed to hold up the wet weather plan implementation schedule."

The Pittsburgh region is one of hundreds of metropolitan areas that have older sewer systems that were designed to overflow regularly during rainstorms as a way to prevent damage to treatment facilities.

Federal water regulations no longer allow such sewage overflows, and a federal court order in 2008 mandated that Alcosan stop all 52 illegal sanitary sewer overflows into the region's rivers by 2026 and significantly reduce discharges from 153 combined sewer overflows.

The Alcosan control plan, submitted to EPA a year ago, proposes only so-called "gray infrastructure" fixes, including construction of bigger collector pipes and two or three massive underground storage tunnels to hold wet-weather flows until they can be pumped through a much-expanded Alcosan treatment facility.

The \$2 billion plan will capture and treat 79 percent of the region's combined sewer overflows. A more extensive \$3.6 billion plan proposal would have captured more than 90 percent of that overflow, but was judged too costly for Alcosan's ratepayers, which include the city of Pittsburgh and 83 other municipalities.

Neither plan contained any green components, but when Alcosan submitted the cheaper plan in January 2013, it asked the EPA for an 18-month extension to study the feasibility of using the alternative overflow controls.

Green sewer system infrastructure is designed to hold and use stormwater where it falls instead of channeling it into collection pipes. It is a relatively new but proven water management strategy, endorsed by the EPA, to reduce the amount of stormwater that must be treated while at the same time beautifying neighborhoods and enhancing public parks and green space.

A number of cities -- Chicago, Philadelphia, Cleveland, Milwaukee, Minneapolis and Washington, D.C. -- have included green components in their overflow plans. But Alcosan has embraced such strategies slowly and reluctantly, said Barney Oursler, executive director of Pittsburgh United, a coalition of 13 environmental, union, community and faith organizations that has campaigned for green infrastructure components.

"We think Alcosan has learned how to do green washing, but isn't really interested in or capable of changing its old gray way of doing things," Mr. Oursler said.

The coalition said Alcosan lacks the vision needed to implement large-scale green infrastructure components in the sewer improvement plan, and has called on city and county officials to replace the authority's board of directors.

But Allegheny County Executive Rich Fitzgerald, who, along with Pittsburgh Mayor Bill Peduto, supports green infrastructure strategies, said he expects the authority will more aggressively pursue those options.

"Even some of the Alcosan staff that have been reluctant to utilize green infrastructure have changed their attitudes and are now pursuing green," Mr. Fitzgerald said. "Gray will be a component of the plan -- it would be unrealistic to say it won't -- but we want to do as much with green as we can."

Mr. Fitzgerald and Mr. Peduto were in Washington, D.C., Tuesday, along with Alcosan executive director Arletta Scott Williams, for meetings on the issue with U.S. Rep. Mike Doyle, D-Forest Hills. A meeting with EPA officials scheduled for Wednesday was postponed to allow the city and county leaders to accompany President Obama on his visit to U.S. Steel's Irvin plant in West Mifflin.

David Sternberg, an EPA spokesman, declined to discuss the specifics of the Alcosan plan decision, but said the agency "supports flow reduction efforts by the municipalities of the Three Rivers Region through the use of green infrastructure as part of a comprehensive approach to achieving healthier waters."

California Releases Five-Year Water Plan

Outlet: Wisconsin Ag Connection

As California experiences one of the driest winters on record, the California Natural Resources Agency, the California Environmental Protection Agency, and the California Department of Food and Agriculture released the final California Water Action Plan, laying out goals and vision for the next five years. The plan will guide state efforts to enhance water supply reliability, restore damaged and destroyed ecosystems, and improve the resilience of our infrastructure.

At the direction of Gov. Edmund G. Brown Jr., a collaborative effort of state agencies, and nearly 100 substantive public and stakeholder comments formed a plan to set direction for a host of near- and long-

term actions on water issues for the state.

"It is a tall order. But it is what we must do to get through this drought and prepare for the next," said Gov. Brown in his 2014 State of the State address.

The governor's proposed 2014-15 budget lays a solid fiscal foundation for implementing near-term actions for the plan, recommending \$618.7 million in funding for water efficiency projects, wetland and watershed restoration, groundwater programs, conservation, flood control, and integrated water management.

Final revisions to the draft plan, released in October, include an expanded section on drought response and a new effort focused on better management of Sierra Nevada headwaters that helps water storage and quality, and ecosystems. Public comment on the draft plan made it clear that California must better understand the economic and ecological harm of sustained dry weather.

The governor's proposed budget would provide \$472.5 million in Proposition 84 funds to the Department of Water Resources (DWR) for integrated regional water management. The bond funds would leverage local and federal investment in projects that reduce demand, build supply, and offer additional benefits such as wildlife habitat and flood management.

Marshall University scientist says formaldehyde in Charleston water likely was from spill

Outlet: Pittsburgh Post-Gazette - Online

Tests show trace amounts of formaldehyde in water pumping through pipes in areas recently affected by a massive chemical spill.

The formaldehyde likely is a byproduct of the chemical involved in the leak, said Dr. Scott Simonton, a Marshall University professor and the vice chairman of the West Virginia Environmental Quality Board.

"What we know scares us, and we know there's a lot more we don't know," Simonton told lawmakers Wednesday morning.

Officials believe crude MCHM and PPH started leaking into the Elk River on or before Jan. 9. Within hours of Freedom Industries, the company that owned the leaking tank, reporting the spill, 300,000 West Virginians were told not to drink their water.

Simonton said they've expected the chemicals involved to breakdown after the spill. Chemicals can break down -- turn into other chemicals based on their composition -- after coming in contact with water, air, skin, sunlight or a slew of other objects.

One of those products Simonton said he and fellow experts expected was formaldehyde. Formaldehyde is found in many different consumer products, including cigarettes, makeup, fertilizers and preserved food, according to a report from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

It's not safe for drinking or breathing, Simonton said. He did not immediately know the amount that could be safely ingested or inhaled.

Simonton and his team, with funding from law firm Thompson and Barney, started testing water samples for formaldehyde shortly after the spill was announced.

Thompson and Barney is one of many firms involved in litigation against Freedom and others associated with the spill.

They tested in a variety of areas around the valley: Simonton said he didn't know the number of samples off the top of his head. He said they just received results from a sample taken from Vandalia Grille, a restaurant in downtown Charleston.

He didn't know the exact amount off the top of his head, and said they collected the sample on the day downtown Charleston was told it could flush its pipes by West Virginia American Water Co.

The water company told this area, the first area "cleared," it could start flushing Jan. 13.

"Frankly, the formaldehyde has me, personally, a little freaked out," Simonton said.

Simonton said he also thought the formaldehyde could pose a health risk if inhaled. , part of the CDC, says the federal Environmental Protection Agency believes "exposure to formaldehyde in drinking water at concentrations of 10 parts per million (ppm) for 1 day or 5 ppm for 10 days is not expected to cause any adverse effects in a child."

"OSHA set a legal limit of 0.75 ppm formaldehyde in air averaged over an 8-hour work day," the report continues.

He questioned state officials' statements that continuing to smell the telltale black licorice odor of the crude MCHM after the water was deemed "safe" was an aesthetic issue.

"I can guarantee you that the citizens of this valley are at least in some instances breathing formaldehyde," he said.

In particular, he pointed to people taking showers. He said the chemicals involved become agitated under heat, and are therefore more noticeable during a hot shower. He said it's likely people breathed in the substance from steam that came as a result of the shower.

The ATSDR data says inhaling formaldehyde can cause irritation of the eyes, nose and throat. High doses ingested by rats have caused stomach damage, according to the study.

Both the CDC study and say formaldehyde is a carcinogen, or something believed to have the ability to cause cancer.

"Further studies of groups who have been occupationally exposed to formaldehyde by inhalation have largely supported this position but provide more evidence that formaldehyde may possibly pose a

carcinogenic risk of lung or sino-nasal cancer, and possibly lymphoid leukemia, in occupationally exposed groups," the WHO study says.

Both studies point to long-term exposure in carcinogen sections.

There are still plenty of questions, Simonton said. He is still waiting to receive many of his test results, and emphasized he's still trying to learn more about all of the chemicals involved.

But the information he has makes him question the safety of the water.

"I can only tell you what I'm doing, and I'm not drinking the water," he said.

Lawmakers asked few questions after the presentation. Senate Majority Leader John Unger, D-Berkeley, said the information caught them off guard.

"I think we're in a little bit of shock because of this," Unger said.

At no point have officials from the state or water company announced they are testing for anything other than crude MCHM.

Municipal, business groups back measure to stall phosphorus rules

Outlet: Milwaukee Journal Sentinel - Online

Municipalities and business groups are backing a bill that would delay implementation of costly phosphorus reduction rules, and instead give communities and industry more time and flexibility to cut the algae-causing pollutant.

The new regulations are supported by more than 100 municipal treatment plants operators and several business groups, which say current regulations will be too costly, are difficult to meet and may not solve algae problems in state waterways.

But environmentalists oppose the bill, which will get its first hearing on Thursday at the Capitol in Madison.

Clean Wisconsin lobbyist Amber Meyer Smith said her group's chief complaint is that a delay will harm the recovery of streams, rivers and lakes now plagued by algae.

Wisconsin Manufactures & Commerce, the state's largest businesses group, has pegged the cost of the standard at up to \$4.9 billion.

But Meyer Smith says a 2012 study by the Department of Natural Resources raised other economic considerations: \$1.1 billion in increased property values, \$598 million in improved recreational opportunities and more than \$10 million in reduced water cleanup costs when the new regulations are implemented.

According to the DNR, 25% of more than 700 waterways in the state fail to meet water quality standards for phosphorus, which comes from sources that include fertilizer, detergent and manure.

Unseen algae blooms deplete oxygen and harm aquatic life. Some forms of the algae can also be toxic. On Lake Michigan, algae blooms fueled by phosphorus play a role in the foul smelling beaches during the summer.

Phosphorus is considered a culprit in the discovery last year of a dead zone bereft of oxygen in Green Bay.

Wisconsin approved phosphorus regulation in late 2010 in the final days of the administration of Democrat Jim Doyle. The regulations were later approved by the Environmental Protection Agency, which has been pushing states to impose stricter limits, known as numeric standards

Wisconsin became the first state in the Midwest to set numerical standards on the allowable amount of phosphorus in public waters.

In the first two-year budget under Gov. Scott Walker, the administration sought to scale back or delay the rules because of worries over costs. Officials later took it out of the budget.

The problem, says attorney Paul Kent, who represents more than a 100 treatment plants that make up the Municipal Environmental Group, is that some municipalities are preparing to renew their permits and encountering obstacles and heavy costs.

"It's become clear that it's been a lot harder than we had hoped," Kent said.

One facet of the current law is known as "adaptive management," where a municipality would be able to collaborate with landowners such as farmers by paying them to cut phosphorus, presumably at a cheaper cost than installing expensive treatment technology.

But Kent says communities are sometimes finding this unworkable.

In Hartford, for example, the community is on the northern end of the watershed, limiting the number of potential partners.

Green Bay's sewerage district is estimating the cost at \$200 million, and officials there believe it would have little overall effect on water quality in the Fox River because other sources of phosphorus from agriculture would not be reduced.

A bill has been introduced by Sen. Rob Cowles (R-Allouez), Sen. Paul Farrow (R-Pewaukee) and Rep. Amy Loudenbeck (R-Clinton.) A public hearing will be held at 12:30 p.m. on Thursday by the Assembly Environment and Forest Committee.

Assembly Speaker Robin Vos gave little indication Tuesday whether the Assembly would move on a measure with just a few floor periods remaining this year.

"The speaker looks forward to see what happens in committee and will make a decision after that time," Vos spokeswoman Kit Beyer said.

The bill gives a permit holder the option to delay the stricter limits if it can show financial hardship. That delay or variance could last as long as 20 years, but during that time, the permit holders would have to gradually reduce their discharges.

It also requires those getting a variance to pay into a fund based on their phosphorus output that would go to counties to pay for programs aimed at cutting such pollution. Kent estimated that the fund could generate \$10 million to \$20 million.

But Meyer Smith said the bill hands over some regulatory authority to the Department of Administration that should be handled by the DNR, and that there is little accountability to ensure that interim cuts actually occur.

She said that even if the Legislature approves it, the measure will face close scrutiny by the EPA.

And she said some communities, including Madison and others in Dane County, are finding ways to work within the law by collaborating with farmers.